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Introduction, or, How to Read This Book

This is not a book of architectural history. Yes, there will be buildings, and yes, there will be architects, but what I seek to do here is an intellectual history slash personal story, and as such I would like to lay out my methodologies, and the reasons behind them.

My primary archives are the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, which hold voluminous correspondence between Aline B. Louchheim and Eero Saarinen, as well as between Louchheim and an assortment of other interlocutors, such as *Architectural Forum* editor Douglas Haskell; editors at Random House; *New York Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable; and more. I have read every single one of these letters, and from that process have meticulously reconstructed Louchheim and Saarinen's early courtship—following dates to the best of my ability, for they rarely dated their letters—and attempted to follow the threads forward as much as possible. Their correspondence began in February 1953 with their meeting so that she could write about him for the *New York Times*, and continued nearly unabated until their marriage in 1954, when, due to increased physical proximity, their personal letters began to lessen. I also used the Yale collection of office correspondence, which gave me a thorough understanding of the ways in which Louchheim and Saarinen began to enter into a new type of discourse, one based in finding their way through a coherent and collaborative professionalism, and which ended only with his early death of a brain tumor at sixty-one.

I became interested in using letters, as opposed to buildings, as a primary archive for a number of reasons. While I received my master's in architectural history at UC Berkeley, and am therefore trained in the normal science of architectural history, which emphasizes an analysis

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of buildings, drawings, images, and so forth, my PhD was in an interdisciplinary field of my own creation called Visual and Narrative Culture. I was drawn to approach my independent work from an interdisciplinary perspective because of my interest in the overlaps between the visual and the narrative, and in the ways in which my own career as an architectural writer had unfolded. I had noticed that I often wrote from and to images, that I was rarely asked to visit a building in person (when I was, it was a special treat); and that when I wrote to and from images I thought about words differently than when I didn't. I also noticed that words had the power to influence how I looked at a building, or an image of a building. I began to wonder if there were perhaps an iterative relationship between the visual and the narrative; if Louchheim had actually influenced the way the shape and form of Saarinen's buildings were perceived through the language that she used. There are models for this in contemporary practice. Caroline Bos, an art historian employed by the firm UNStudio in Rotterdam, is the closest to Louchheim in terms of her role, which is to collaborate with her architect husband Ben Van Berkel and offer a completely different lens and viewpoint than a designer would offer. I myself have been in romantic relationships with artists and found that my ability to tell a story has been something that has shaped not only how they have seen their projects once done, but how they conceptualize their projects while they're happening. I am invested, therefore, in language as a mode of framing and articulating a visual experience, as opposed to relying on more typical historical methods and ideas.

I was asked once if I particularly liked Saarinen's architecture, and I have to confess that I am totally agnostic. This agnosticism comes not from not caring, or not wanting to care, but from the fact that I cannot actually see his buildings clearly—they are visible and legible to me now, having read all of these letters and all of Louchheim's interventions, only through her narrative lens. I cannot imagine seeing the TWA Terminal at JFK, that swooping bird, without thinking instantly of the brochure that Louchheim produced that referred to the building as a bird, and then without thinking almost as instantly of Saarinen's resistance to that metaphor, and of her insistence that it was a good one. My very first architectural history class gave me a language to understand the visual world that I saw around me, and I remember after a few weeks of class walking around campus and feeling like the world was louder and brighter. Suddenly I realized that what I had simply thought of as a slab was in fact a pediment; that a line of windows along the top of a building was a clere-

story; that an S-shaped arch was an ogee. It felt like the visual world had been suddenly newly activated by this acquired language, and it was that experience that compelled me to keep writing about architecture and to keep thinking about it from a narratively oriented vantage point. Thus this project, and its emphasis on the narrative. I do not want to analyze Saarinen's forms, as others have done that—and so well. I do not want to weigh in on his contributions to the corporate campus, or to college campuses, because my interest here is not in the primary evidence of his buildings, but in this secondary layer—Louchheim's stories and words—that have so far been almost entirely overlooked.

Thus my reliance on the archives that I chose, and the way in which I chose to use them. I also—and this was pointed out to me by my colleague Caroline Riley during a Berkeley Americanist Group meeting—wanted to use these archives as visual documents in and of themselves. It is as though I am following a thread that continues to iterate between the material/visual and the narrative, and I went from the narrative in terms of the language used in the documents to analyzing them visually. I wanted to pay attention to when a letter was typed and when it was handwritten (Louchheim almost invariably typed hers, sometimes on *New York Times* stationery, particularly when, I hypothesize, she wanted to remind Saarinen of her power; Saarinen almost invariably wrote his in scrawling longhand); I wanted to think about the sketches and drawings that Saarinen often added to his; to the use of inside jokes like the “clauses-of-caution” they alluded to frequently as a means of protecting their relationship from outside forces beyond their control, the use of brackets around ideas they were still forming, all of which mix the visual and the narrative. Some might wonder if this approach is perhaps airless, or almost suffocating in its depth and focus. But I found that this was the only way that I could truly make sense of the material: by thinking about the first layer as a way of understanding what had happened when two people got together, and the second layer as a series of visual documents that added depth and weight to the interaction. This is after all the heart of my argument—that in this case, particularly, and also in many other cases, design and language become interstitial to each other. Iterative. I want to argue that the role of language and narrative in architecture and design is not a postgame description of something that exists in some other pure form before it is activated through language, but in fact a constitutive element of design. That even though viewers of Saarinen's buildings might not have known exactly when and where Louchheim wrote

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that the TWA Terminal was a bird, they thought it was a bird because of the way in which she'd introduced that idea into the press and therefore the popular culture. I argue that their viewing of the building as a bird in fact makes the building a bird. I believe that the way in which we are taught to look at something—that pediment, that clerestory, that ogee—profoundly changes our experience of the visual referent, and that is at the heart of this project.

This book asks us to do a number of things. It asks us to believe that it is worthwhile to understand two people who were in love in the 1950s because it teaches us something about love (always important), and also creative collaboration. It asks us to suspend certain disciplinary boundaries that we may have thought were necessary—that any work that deals with architecture must look at buildings and analyze their value or weight or power. It also asks us to think broadly across time, to wonder how one person can influence another both through time and professionalism, and also more directly. It has consistently asked me to ask myself why Aline Louchheim has had such a hold over me, and it has asked that I continue to return to the source, to the endless letters that she and Saarinen wrote to each other. It has asked me to make intuitive connections that can feel like leaps, and it has asked me to trust that there is an evidentiary needle in a haystack even when it feels like I'll never find the perfect moment. To some readers, this evidence may feel circumstantial. Historians have been trained to look for the smoking gun and in this case, there isn't one. What there is, and what I have found by reading so much, is a series of patterns that have begun to emerge, a gentle and gradual wave of involvement, and a sense that even as this is a story about two people who thought about architecture together, this is also a story about all the ways in which architecture can be thought about. All the ways in which love can be thought about.

It is my hope that in the same way in which their love story compelled me to keep reading the archives, their love story will compel readers now to muscle through whatever doubts and concerns they might have about how this book was put together, and to continue reading so that we may, together, begin to think through what it means to produce architecture, what it means to work together, and what it means to talk about something that we want to talk about.

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